Cajun licenses, plates in works

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LAFAYETTE — Two proposed legislative bills would allow residents to proclaim they’re “Cajun” on drivers licenses and license plates, with special fees for the designations used to support an agency that promotes French language and culture in the state.

“Cajun is a hot item, and people are proud now,” said state Rep. Mike Huval, R-Breaux Bridge, one of seven members of the Acadiana delegation sponsoring a bill to create a prestige license plate that reads “I’m Cajun ... and proud.”

The proposed license plate would also feature an image related to Cajun culture, but Huval said the design is still in the works.

The special license plate would not be limited to bona fide Cajuns but also available for adopted Cajuns who want to show pride in the regional culture, he said.

“We are hoping it takes off and people get excited,” he said.

An annual $15 fee for the license plate would be used to support a Council for the Development of French in Louisiana program for recruiting and training French teachers.

CODOFIL, a Lafayette-based agency that oversees a number of programs to promote French in Louisiana, also would benefit from proposed legislation by state Sen. Fred Mills, R-Parks, for “I’m a Cajun” drivers licenses and identification cards.

For an annual fee of $5, or $20 for a four-year license, the words would be printed beneath a person’s picture on their license or state ID.

The fees would be dedicated to supporting CODOFIL. Mills said he crafted his bill after hearing about the Cajun license plate proposal and talking about other possibilities with state District 2 Public Service Commissioner Scott Angelle, who, like Mills, is a Cajun from St. Martin Parish.

Mills likened the “I’m a Cajun” drivers licenses to the vanity credit cards that have become popular in recent years.

“People love to put all kinds of things on their Visa card,” he said. “No one wants a dull Visa card anymore.”

The proposed bills come as CODOFIL has fought to maintain state funding.

Gov. Bobby Jindal last year vetoed $100,000 in funding for the group, cutting the CODOFIL budget to about $152,000.

CODOFIL supporters raised $90,000 through a festival and fundraising campaign last year to fill the budget gap.

The proposed state budget to be considered in the Legislative session that begins Monday does not restore the $100,000 that was cut last year.

“It’s a status quo budget,” CODOFIL President Bill Arceaux said.

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He said CODOFIL plans to work with area legislators to restore some or all of the $100,000, but Arceneaux said he is not hopeful, considering last year’s veto.

CODOFIL was founded as a state agency in 1968 during a resurgence of interest in preserving French culture in the state. Over the past two decades, the agency has gradually seen its state budget allotment whittled away.

“In 1990, the budget of CODOFIL was $1 million,” Arceneaux said “... We are a state agency in Louisiana, and we are treated like a stepchild.”

CODOFIL Executive Director Joseph Dunn, who is in France this month interviewing teachers for the state’s French immersion programs, said via email the agency is appreciative of any Legislative assistance to find new sources of revenue.

“As the only Francophone government agency in the United States, we hope that these initiatives will assist us in furthering our legislative mandates to provide access to French language tourism, economic development, educational, and professional opportunities to all French and Creole-speaking Louisianians,” Dunn wrote.